

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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Read this Introduction

There is nothing stiff about memoir. It's not a chronological pronouncement of the facts of your life: born in Hoboken, New Jersey; schooled at Elm Creek Elementary; moved to Big Flat, New York, where you attended Holy Mother High School. Memoir doesn't cling to an orderly procession of time and dates, marching down the narrow aisle of your years on this earth. Rather it encompasses the moment you stopped, turned your car around, and went swimming in a deep pool by the side of the road. You threw off your gray suit, a swimming trunk in the backseat, a bridge you dived off. You knew you had an appointment in the next town, but the water was so clear. When would you be passing by this river again? The sky, the clouds, the reeds by the roadside mattered. You remembered bologna sandwiches made on white bread; you started to whistle old tunes. How did life get so confusing? Last week your seventeen-year-old told you he was gay and you suspect your wife is having an affair. You never liked selling industrial-sized belts to tractor companies anyway. Didn't you once dream of being a librarian or a dessert cook? Maybe it was a landscaper, a firefighter?

Memoir gives you the ability to plop down like the puddle that forms and spreads from the shattering of a glass of milk on the kitchen floor. You watch how the broken glass gleams from the electric light overhead. The form of memoir has leisure enough to examine all this.

Memoir is not a declaration of the American success story, one undeviating road, the conquering of one mountaintop after

another. The puddle began in downfall. The milk didn't get to the mouth. Whatever your life, it is urging you to record it—to embrace the crumbs with the cake. It's why so many of us want to write memoir. We know the particulars, but what really went on? We want the emotional truths under the surface that drove our life.

In the past, memoir was the country of old people, a looking back, a reminiscence. But now people are disclosing their lives in their twenties, writing their first memoir in their thirties and their second in their forties. This revolution in personal narrative that has unrolled across the American landscape in the last two and a half decades is the expression of a uniquely American energy: a desire to understand in the heat of living, while life is fresh, and not wait till old age—it may be too late. We are hungry—and impatient now.

But what if you are already sixty, seventy years old, eighty, ninety? Let the thunder roll. You've got something to say. You are alive and you don't know for how long. (None of us really knows for how long.) No matter your age there is a sense of urgency, to make life immediate and relevant.

Think of the word: *memoir*. It comes from the French *mémoire*. It is the study of memory, structured on the meandering way we remember. Essentially it is an examination of the zigzag nature of how our mind works. The thought of Cheechos ricochets back to a broken fence in our backyard one Nebraska spring, then hops over to the first time we stood before a mountain and understood kindness. A smell, a taste—and a whole world flares up.

How close can we get? All those questions, sometimes murky and uncomfortable: who was that person that was your mother? Why did you play basketball when you longed to play football? Your head wanted to explode until you first snorted cocaine behind the chain-link fence near the gas station. Then things got quiet and peaceful, but what was that black dog still at your throat?

Read this Introduction

We are a dynamic country, fast-paced, ever onward. Can we make sense of love and ambition, pain and longing? In the center of our speed, in the core of our forward movement, we are often confused and lonely. That's why we have turned so full-heartedly to the memoir form. We have an intuition that it can save us. Writing is the act of reaching across the abyss of isolation to share and reflect. It's not a diet to become skinny, but a relaxation into the fat of our lives. Often without realizing it, we are on a quest, a search for meaning. What does our time on this earth add up to?

The title *Old Friend from Far Away* comes from the *Analects* by Confucius. We reach back in time to another country. Isn't that what memory is?

To have an old friend visit
from far away—
what a delight!

So let's pick up the pen, and kick some ass. Write down who you were, who you are, and what you remember.